

Frequently Asked Questions

This is a partial list of frequently asked questions and responses. Please check back soon for more information and additional questions and responses.

What is the purpose of the open letter?

The letter is intended to provide a strong collective voice for scientists in redefining the terms of our relationships with the publishers of our scientific journals. Using our freedom of choice in a free market, we are offering the publishers of our scientific journals something that they value - the opportunity to profit from our ideas and hard work, and our continued patronage as subscribers - in exchange for something that we value - free and unrestricted access to the published record of our collective work.

What the letter proposes is simple and balances the interests of commercial and non-profit publishers, scientists and the public. In exchange for their role in editing, publishing and peer review, publishers get a six month lease on, rather than ownership of, the original research reports they publish. After that, the published record becomes public domain. The publishers get this 6 month interval to recover their costs and make a profit, but they don't get to claim permanent ownership of the only permanent record of the scientific progress, paid for by tens of billions of dollars of mostly public money every year, and representing the original ideas and millions of hours of hard work by hundreds of thousands of scientists, and the voluntary participation of hundreds of thousands of patients in clinical studies.

How can I help?

Sign the open letter. Share it with colleagues and encourage them to consider signing it. Talk to publishers of the journals you read, review for, serve as an editor for, or publish in; tell them of your commitment and ask them to adopt the policy advocated in the open letter. If you are an active member of a scientific society, talk to leaders and other members of the society and urge them to support this initiative.

Which journals have already adopted a compatible editorial policy?

To date, the following journals have adopted the policy that all the original research reports that they publish belong to the public domain, and have provided all current and archival content for distribution by PubMed Central.

Genome Biology

All journals published by BioMed Central

The following journals have committed to allowing all the material that they publish to be distributed freely by any legitimate non-commercial institutions, including PubMed Central, within 6 months after publication:

Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences

The following journals have committed to allowing all the material that they publish to be distributed freely by PubMed Central within 6 months after publication:

The British Medical Journal
Molecular Biology of the Cell

The following journals currently provide recent contents for free within 6 months after publication, but only through their own Web sites, or through an agent's Web site (eg., High Wire Press):

Journal of Cell Biology
All journals of The American Society for Microbiology

The publishers of scientific journals are part of our scientific community and we welcome and encourage constructive dialog with them. If you wish to contact the editors or publishers of any of these journals to inquire about their policies, or to encourage them to adopt the policy advocated in the open letter, we encourage you to do so.

If you are a publisher or can update us on the editorial policy of any journal, please contact us at feedback@publiclibraryofscience.org

Some people say they are hesitant to sign because they view the pledge as an effort to boycott biomedical journals, including some of the most prestigious. Some journals have also used the portrayal of our efforts as an unjustifiably hostile boycott. Is it?

We view the pledge as a strong positive statement of support for journals that are willing to make their articles freely accessible, rather than a boycott of those that do not. The letter explicitly defines standards that many scientists feel should be met by journals that seek their voluntary support in the form of submission or review of manuscripts, editorial work, or subscription. By giving a single voice to many scientists, the letter makes it easier for journals to understand the practical advantages of adopting the policy that the letter

advocates. It is true that the effort we have undertaken could place journals that do not comply at significant risk - and we hope that they will recognize and weigh this risk. No institution that asks for our money and voluntary contributions of work and intellectual property has a right to take these for granted. We have allowed for nearly a year of constructive discussion before initiating any actions to give the journals plenty of time to consider this proposal and find ways to succeed with it.

Some journals already make their back issues available for free at their own Web sites or through contractors like HighWire Press. Isn't this good enough?

NO! It is true that many journals currently allow individuals to read back issues free of charge, on a controlled basis, through the journals' websites or through a chosen contractor. There are, however, critical differences between this policy and release of articles into the public domain. It is crucial to understand an important difference between material that is freely accessible, on a controlled basis, one paper at a time, at a journal's web site and material that is freely accessible in a single comprehensive collection. The latter can be efficiently searched in a single search of the archival literature, the former cannot. (Imagine how much less useful DNA sequences would be if instead of Genbank and other global repositories we had dozens of smaller collections of sequences each of which could only be accessed one at a time through a genome center's website). Large scale searching is obviously one of the most important benefits of Internet accessibility, but other possibilities, including extensive interlinking between reports originally published in diverse journals, will also require the ability to search freely within one comprehensive archive.

The letter asks journals to allow unimpeded open distribution, so that researchers can begin to take on the challenge of integrating and interconnecting this fantastically rich but extremely fragmented and unsystematic information, and linking it to other kinds of data, such as genome sequence data, other genomic data, structural data, etc.; so that scientists and teachers can create local online resources for graduate course or high level undergrad courses, or even pre-college courses; so that physicians, including physicians without ready access to a major medical library, can access the original evidence on which to base their "evidence-based" practice; so that scientists can apply their creativity and energy toward making this huge information resource more valuable and accessible, in ways that no single journal or ejournal contractor like HighWire press can or should monopolize. Diversity in providers will encourage innovation in finding ways to make the archive more useful to its users. But if it turns out that nobody does it any better than Highwire and the publisher's own sites, then everyone will prefer to go to those sites and the material will still be there, so, no harm done.

The important question to ask is why should scientists support the publishers' demands to maintain their monopoly control over the research articles that they have published? What good does it do?

PNAS has agreed to allow its contents to be distributed freely and non-exclusively by PubMed Central and other non-commercial institutions, but still requires that commercial users obtain permission from PNAS. Does this satisfy the conditions advocated in the letter?

Many of the signers of the letter have indicated that they would find such a policy acceptable.

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Some journals and editors have been concerned about relinquishing "control" of published reports when materials are placed in the public repository. Is this a danger?

We have difficulty understanding what significant risks are attached to lack of enforcement of copyrights six months after publication of articles in our field. At that point, reprinting of any articles, even in books that make a profit for a publisher, can hardly be viewed as damaging by authors who seek wide distribution of their work. But we all know that such reprinting and profit-making is exceedingly rare, especially in a digital world. And there is a deeper issue: should we continue to support journals that seek to own as private property the only permanent, systematic formal record of the results of scientific research, much of which was conducted at public expense, representing the hard work and original ideas of others, and for which neither authors nor funders seek compensation?

" I think it's an incredibly bad idea to make content free for all, including commercial enterprises... An enterprising publisher can simply take all of *Journal X's* content, under the proposed

scenario, and, in effect, republish it, with a good certainty they will continue to get plenty of hits (and income, as they could easily institute pay per view)."

A completely specious, pseudo-populist argument.

The nightmare envisioned here is that, despite the fact that they are available online for free, some company is going to figure out a way to make a business out of selling peeks at back issues of *Journal X*. And I can't even get Goodwill to take them! That "enterprising publisher" would either have to add significant value to this free material, or she'd have to be a phenomenally good salesperson. It's pretty ironic that publishers would complain that free access would cost them subscription revenues, and then turn around and wring their hands because someone else might find a way to make money on the material they've given away.

And more seriously, who actually loses if some commercial company finds a way to charge people for reading a paper or a whole journal that they could read for free? Not the readers, not the authors, not the scientific community, not the public, and not even *Journal X* (after all, if *Journal X*'s publishers were clever enough to find a way to do this, they would be free to do so). Presumably the only way that any company could pull this off would be to provide some added value that would make it worth paying for. I don't think this is all that likely, but if it happens, it will be a good thing for the scientific community - like figuring out a clever way to recycle old tires and resell them as sandals. More power to them, and where's the loss to *Journal X*, science or the public?

I don't feel any safer knowing that *Journal X* is protecting me from having old issues resold by a commercial vendor. The publishers don't want to lose control, for the same reason that nobody ever wants to give up control over anything - it's a primitive instinct, not a thoughtful policy.

What efforts are in progress to persuade publishers to adopt the policy advocated in the open letter? What are their prospects for success?

Many journals are actively reviewing their policies in light of this open letter and related efforts. We are optimistic that the commitment of the leading scientific journals and their sponsoring societies to the greater good of scientific progress and the public good will overcome their instinctive reluctance to relinquish any of their control. Many of the supporters of this initiative who are members of editorial boards of leading journals have already begun discussions with their publishers and with their scientific societies. These efforts will intensify as more scientists become aware of this initiative and sign the open letter. The initial responses of many of the journals we've contacted have been encouraging. We will post reports of progress in these discussions at this site.

How will journals make a living if they give away their papers for free?

In the same way that a midwife can earn a living without keeping the babies that she delivers. We believe that the publishers of scientific journals should be fairly compensated for the important service they provide in the scientific publishing process. We believe that granting journals a six month "lease" on the primary research reports they publish in their pages gives them a simple way to maintain their revenues with little change in their business practices. During this time, they would charge subscription fees for print editions and for electronic access to the articles on the journals' websites, just as they do now. It is unlikely that many subscriptions would be cancelled simply because material would be available free of charge six month later, and journals make relatively little money selling access to their archived.. Few scientists who currently subscribe to journals would want to wait six months to read about the latest results in their field. Indeed, many journals have already recognized that they have little to lose by providing free access to archival material, and have voluntarily opened their archives up to the public.

What extra work or expense will be required of journals to make their material available?

Very little. Electronic versions of manuscripts are an intermediate in preparing papers for publication. Publishers are asked to provide these electronic documents to legitimate online distributors, such as PubMed Central, after the six-month lease has expired. For older papers, the publishers are asked simply to donate the distribution rights, not to pay the cost of digitization or to provide original paper copies.

What is the status of plans for establishing online public libraries of science?

The successful establishment of an online public library of science will require that

- * the owners of copyrights on original scientific research reports agree to grant free distribution rights to legitimate non-commercial institutions
- * published articles that currently exist only in printed form be converted to a suitable digital format
- * the necessary computational infrastructure be established to house this material and support its use

Securing the rights to free distribution and use of the research archive (including material that currently exists only in print on paper) is the purpose of the open letter.

A group of scientists has already begun soliciting funds to cover the cost of converting to digital format all published life sciences articles that currently exist only in printed form (amounting to hundreds of millions of pages), focusing initially on the more recent and more heavily-used journal volumes, but eventually encompassing the entire published life sciences literature, including non-English publications.

Finally, an example of the essential supporting computational infrastructure, PubMed Central, has already been established by the NCBI. We anticipate that additional ventures will be initiated once more material is available for free distribution,

Why does the letter refer only to biology and biomedical sciences?

There are no obvious boundaries between the life sciences and other scientific fields, and we would like to see the archive of published research reports in all the sciences similarly available through online public libraries. The open letter focuses on the life sciences simply because its authors are primarily biologists, and most familiar with the publication practices in the life sciences. We welcome the opportunity to work with others to extend this initiative to other scientific and scholarly disciplines.

Is this proposal related to previous proposals to challenge the current system of journal-mediated peer-review?

No. This proposal is entirely intended to make peer-reviewed research reports, published in scientific journals, available through a free online public library.

Does the letter advocate that PubMedCentral (PMC) should have a unique role in archiving or online distribution of scientific research reports?

This was never a stated or unstated intent. In fact, it is highly desirable that the information be accessible and searchable at multiple sites, not only in the United States but throughout the world. The example of PMC as a public repository of biomedical research reports was offered because the important role and excellent performance of PubMed are widely appreciated, and because PMC, linked to PubMed, is the only site we know of that already has the desired characteristics.

I have heard that PMC is not working. Isn't the idea of making it a large, fully searchable archive quixotic?

Although there were some early technical problems in the first months of operation of PMC (surely not an unexpected situation), it is now fully operational and working well. Its current content is small, not for lack of technical capacity, but because relatively few journals (fewer than twenty) have thus far agreed to provide their content. Ironically, some journals have used the small size of the PMC archive as a perverse argument against allowing PMC to distribute their contents.

PMC is operated by NCBI, the same organization that has successfully operated PubMed and Genbank, arguably the two most successful and important online resources in the life sciences. Its parent organization, the NLM, is the World's most comprehensive archive of biomedical literature. The staff of PMC is confident that very large volumes of articles can be stored and searched at the site.

If I sign the letter and then change my mind, how can I recant my signature?

Send a message to feedback@publiclibraryofscience.org and your name will immediately be removed from the list.

Who is behind publiclibraryofscience.org?

The publiclibraryofscience.org site was set up to facilitate the efforts of a diverse group of scientists to promote an online public library of science.

Patrick O. Brown (pbrown@cmgm.stanford.edu) of Stanford University School of Medicine and the Howard Hughes Medical Institute and Michael Eisen (mbeisen@lbl.gov) of the Lawrence Berkeley National Lab and University of California at Berkeley are currently maintaining the site and they assume full responsibility for its contents. The signatures on the open letter represent individual support of the views expressed in the open letter only. The opinions expressed in these explanatory notes and in the answers to these FAQ's are the sole responsibility of their authors (POB and MBE), and do not necessarily represent the views of the signers of the open letter.